

Massachusetts congresswoman pushes to improve body armor

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MILFORD, Mass., (11/13/09) U.S. Rep. Niki Tsongas of Massachusetts met with Soldiers and technology experts at the Vet Center in Lowell, Mass., Nov. 12 to discuss how to improve the body armor that Soldiers wear into combat.

In 2007 alone, the Army reported 257,000 acute orthopedic injuries that were linked to the stress of bearing heavy loads during repeated deployments, leading to 20,000 non-deployable Soldiers.

In an effort to decrease injuries and maintain an equivalent level of threat protection, Tsongas, a member of the House Committee on Armed Services, sponsored H.R. 2473, a bill to create a lighter body armor for Soldiers while maintaining an equivalent level of threat protection and a task force to research, develop, test, evaluate and procure body armor.

"I have spoken to Soldiers about how they dealt with the weight of their body armor and discovered the tendency was to take it off and put it down. I knew as a country we had the resources to change this," said Tsongas.

Attending the meeting was Brig. Gen. Peter N. Fuller, program executive officer for the Program Executive Office headquartered at Fort Belvoir, Va. PEO designs, develops, procures, fields, and sustains virtually everything the Soldier wears or carries.

"Ninety pounds is probably the minimum that individuals are carrying and medics may be carrying approximately 150 pounds when you consider their aid bags and all of their other gear," said Fuller. "Body armor is one component that is adding all of that weight. We want to improve our body armor to the point where it's very light-weight and flexible."

To accomplish these tasks, Fuller has worked with experts, such as Janet Ward, a textile technologist and ballistics team leader from the Natick Soldier Research Development & Engineering Center in Natick, Mass.

NSRDEC has the dedicated mission to maximize the Warrior's survivability, sustainability, mobility, combat effectiveness and quality of life by treating the Soldier as a System.

To include the perspective of a Soldier who has deployed to a theater of operations, Tsongas invited Maj. Carl C. Gramstorff, state training officer for the Massachusetts Army National Guard, to share his personal experience. He deployed to Afghanistan in 2007 as part of an embedded training team to train members of the Afghan Army.

"I am an infantryman and I would say 90 pounds is probably on the low end of the spectrum as far as weight goes," said Gramstorff. It's not bad when you're just walking around and you don't have

to go anywhere real far real fast but once you get up into the hills it definitely becomes hard to deal with."

While addressing the group, Tsongas took a moment to thank the parents of a Soldier who was killed in Iraq. "I would like to thank Brian and Alma Hart, who brought to Sen. Kennedy's attention the need to armor vehicles in Iraq due to the tragic loss of their son. Their efforts have helped save countless lives," said Tsongas.

Pfc. John D. Hart 20, of Bedford, Mass.; assigned to 1st Battalion (Airborne), 508th Infantry Battalion, 173rd Infantry Brigade Camp Ederle, Italy was killed Oct. 18, 2003 when enemy forces, using rocket-propelled grenades and small-arms fire, ambushed his patrol in Taza, Iraq.

In 2005 Soldiers in Iraq began receiving M1114 Humvees that added significant protection to the standard combat vehicle. The initiative to create lighter body armor follows that precedent of improved protection.